3. Disabling Employment Services and beyond with Iris

**Voiceover**

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**Intro Voiceover**

Welcome to Services Australia, you have called the Centrelink Employment. We are currently experiencing longer than usual wait time. We are working as quickly as possible to process all claims. The agency is continually working to process... (fades out)

**Iris**

That's the dulcet tones of Centrelink. I'm tired of hearing them. Maybe you are to. I'm Iris Lee and you're listening to 2022 Disability Day Rest Is Survival broadcast on 3CR Community Radio. I'm going to unravel the absurdity of the Disability Employment Services also called DES. I produce this program as a white settler on the stolen lands of the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri peoples. The fight against punitive systems is the fight against the settler colony. Now, what is DES?

After decades of cuts to Social Security, a concession to the social struggles of the 70s, just under 300,000 disabled people in Australia after some medical certification, end up on a stream with a paltry $47 a day jobseeker payment called DES. This schemes' propaganda promises personalised support and means participants don't get forced on to work for the dole program. DES is lucrative for the state granting $1.3 billion for private DES providers to compete with each other for disabled clients.

In my experience and the experience of many others, DES works against the needs of disabled people to care for each other and rest, and to even assist them to find work. The one year job outcome access rate is a measly 1%. We hear from Katherine and Jael/Hannah about their experiences in the DES program. We explore how the DES program is itself disabling rather than supportive. Disabling Employment Services is a more real name. Finally, we look to solidarity and dreaming beyond DES. First, we hear introductions from Katherine Kane, an advocate for raising jobseeker.

**Katherine**

Hello, everyone. My name is Katherine. And I'm really happy to be here today.

**Iris**

Thanks heaps for joining us. So first up, what was it like being on DES as someone also who couldn't work?

**Katherine**

Alright, so a tiny bit of background. I have a chronic illness that I think the simplest way to describe it is, my body doesn't make energy properly. Now that I am really nice and stable, I'm able to leave the house twice a week with a support worker for maybe an hour or so. So imagine that this is before that. And I'm not on the disability pension. So I don't have money, I don't have resources, I don't have support workers. I am trying to do everything myself. I'm trying to stay alive myself, feed myself, keep myself clean, all of that basic stuff.

And on top of that, I have this hoop to jump through, where once a fortnight, I have to drive 20 minutes into town to go and sit in a room for 10 minutes, while a guy ticks a box and says, "Yeah, we got nothing for you. See you in another fortnight". So this incredibly limited capacity to do anything. And I have to spend a huge chunk of it on make work that does nothing to make my life better, except ensure that I don't get my very small payment taken away.

It was dire. And of course, I kept asking "Can we do this via the phone? That would be infinitely easier for me. It would save me on this petrol that I can't afford, it will save me this energy that I don't have, save me staying a day in bed after I do this". And they were like "No, you can't. You can't do this via the phone. You have to come in".

**Iris**

Yeah, just that total lack of regard for your needs there and just a waste of all these resources going into their system.

**Katherine**

For no benefit, no benefit whatsoever. Not for them. Not for me, not for anyone except a little tick box somewhere that said, Yes. Katherine jumped through that hoop. That was the entire output. Like I had a couple of decent, individual case managers or whatever they're called nowadays. Over that time, I had a couple of decent ones.

And they were like, "No, it's clear. Like, you can't work, we get that. There aren't that many jobs that will allow you to work for 20 minutes and then take a three hour nap. Understood". A couple of them would try and they'd find like "Oh, I found a thing about writing articles. It's only 15 hours a week".

Thanks for trying. An attempt was made. But yeah, the fundamental structure of the system was like, so misaligned with what I needed, and what my situation was that it was never going to work ever. And there is no way to recognise that or to make the change.

**Iris**

So frustrating. I guess we're at this stage that the government is talking about more and more reforms of this system that seems to be designed in ways that doesn't work. And if the outcome is what is intended by design, it says a lot about what the government's doing, if this is their intention of what to do with disabled people on the DES.

There's also a linkage between the DES and the National Disability Insurance Agency. And at the start of November, the ALP government announced a pilot program connecting NDIS participants with the DES for interested disabled people on NDIS. I'm wondering if you could speak about linkages between the NDIS and the DES.

**Katherine**

They sound like they should have perfectly aligned goals, hypothetically, they're perfectly aligned goals, like the NDIS and the NDIA. Designed to support disabled Australians to live their lives, to do all of the things that everybody else wants to do, which includes employment, if that is a thing that they are capable of doing, under circumstances that make it possible for them.

Whether that includes workplace accommodations, or whether that includes more flexibility than a number of employees are usually willing to offer. And the DES, hypothetically has the same sort of thing. But within the narrow ambit of employment, like helping disabled people with the resources, the connections, getting all the things they need to be able to be employed.

If the DES actually did that, linkages with the NDIS would be possibly slightly redundant, but they would be perfectly aligned and everything would be fine. Like, you can talk to the NDIS, about getting some work accommodations that help you work. Or you could talk to the DES about getting the accommodations that could help you to work.

That's not the reality. The NDIS is, for its flaws, which exists, still has the stated goal, and it is mostly aligned with the goal of helping disabled Australians with their lives. A normal life in the community. The DES, so far as I understand it... I don't even... I cannot even beautifully articulate what their actual goal is, other than making themselves some money.

Because if their stated goal was to help disabled Australians enter the workforce, and to get long term employment, none of the structures and some of the incentives but none of the structures of the DES are actually set up for that. Like they don't actually do the thing. One of the things that's great about the NDIS, when it's working correctly, is there's this process where they find out what you need. Congratulations you're the NDIS.

And now we have this whole process about, what are the areas of your life that you need help with? What are the resources you need? Do you need like mobility aids? Do you need this? Do you need that? What supports do you need? The DES has none of that. So far as I'm aware (laughing). So I certainly didn't and I've never spoken to anyone where their first interview with a DES is like, so tell me what your access needs? Tell me what you need to become employed. Part time, full time, whatever works for you.

Theirs, it's "Welcome to the DES, sit down, here are 20 checklists, at least six of which are completely irrelevant to you. Here's a bunch of forms where we're just going to take a bunch of boxes, see you in a fortnight". There's no linkage saying here are the resources you need, here are how we're going to get the resources. This is what our funding is for, this is what we're here for, to help connect you to whatever it is you need. That process seems fundamentally missing slash broken and slash working as designed. Where none of that happens.

**Iris**

Yes, so a lot of like pillering and skepticism of the announcement. What's the intentions here? Especially because we know in recent decades, like moving more and more disabled people onto jobseeker has been the main intention of the government as a sort of like, austerity measure and making it more and more difficult to get onto the Disability Support Pension.

**Katherine**

Yeah, it took me two and a half years of legal fighting for me to finally succeed at it.

**Iris**

That's such a long, time consuming battle.

**Katherine**

And energy consuming. Yeah, absolutely. It was, it was devastating. But facing the idea of the rest of my life on jobseeker was just like, well, that's not life. I've seen the estimates, the current estimates are that there's more than 400,000 people who should be on the DSP, but are on jobseeker instead.

**Iris**

Yeah, huge numbers of disabled people. They're abandoned by the state in that way. And yeah, so picking up the overall theme of today's broadcast Disability Day, which is Rest Is Survival, what do you wish DES was?

**Katherine**

I wish it was a disability specific version of what the NDIS is supposed to be. Like, if you are capable of working, and you, like disabled people are people. And a lot of us want to work. I miss working, I enjoyed working. And if they miraculously came up with a set of circumstances that allowed me to do so heck yeah, I would.

Everyone wants to do something that's meaningful to them. Everybody wants to contribute, everybody wants to do something, whether that's traditional work, or volunteering, or whatever. Everybody wants to matter. I'm not going to start doing inspiration point, I'm really not. But disabled people have a lot of strength, and a lot of capability that actually is derived sometimes from being disabled.

Like we've been resilient for a very long time, we've learned what is and is not important in our lives, our values are often really strong. Because if you have to give up stuff, you give up the stuff that isn't important. So as a result, if you make the right accommodations, disabled people in your workplace could not just be a, "I guess they'll do because we couldn't find anybody who wasn't disabled", but they can be absolute superstars in your workplace.

So along with my energy limitations, comes a good deal of brain fog of when I get tired, I start losing words and start getting very incoherent. So before I got sick, I was probably more of a waffler than I am now. And more and more since being ill, my communication has gotten more succinct, more powerful, more accessible, less self involved, like all of those things where you're raised to be like, "Oh, you're the smart kid".

Smart kids are the worst communicators (laughing). Smart kids who have had to go through the process I've gone through, become much better communicators. And I'm just picking one example out of 60 zillion, that is a consequence of my disability. I can go on a radio show and hopefully make good sense to a bunch of people who are listening to me in ways that I don't think I could have done beforehand.

And so that's just one example out of 60 zillion, of the ways in which disabled people are not just something you have to put up with in your workplace, but can actually be amazing in your workplace, if they get the accommodations they need. And that's what the DES should be. A resource center of everything from "okay, you need an adjustable desk, we'll make sure that your workplace has an adjustable desk", or "ah, you've got these lighting problems, okay, here's how to manage those”.

And "here's worksheets, here's resources, here's some funding so that we can get you the shoes you need so that you can stand all day", or whatever it is. The same way the NDIS is designed to be all like, "you can go out in the community if you have the walker that you need to maintain your mobility. So let's get you the walker so that you can go out into the community. What do you need to make that happen? Let's make that happen".

**Iris**

You just heard from Katherine Cain, raise the rate advocate. You're listening to 3CR community radio 2022, Disability Day broadcast 855 am streaming live at 3cr.org.au and digital. This year's theme is Rest is Survival. We're examining the deep problems of disability employment services or DES which really disrupts our rest. Next up, we hear introductions from Jael, who I invited on because of her incisive way of analysing systems.

It is a mixed bag in my experience as well. In talking more about that, I'd like to put the purported function of disability employment services or DES is to help sick and disabled people find work. Yet that only happens to 1% of people and there's $1.3 billion that go into it, that's around $4,300 per person that goes to these private DES providers. What is your experience like, been telling you around, what's the actual function of the DES

**Hannah**

Hey my name is Hannah or Jael. I've been navigating the job service provider system and Disability Employment Services for about eight years and four years respectively, and have had a wide range of experiences through different organisations on the very bottom end of the scale, and some organisations that like while the system is still inherently flawed are trying their best.

**Hannah**

They pay lip service, first and foremost, to the what they believe their stated function is under the government jurisdiction. Primarily, their main role is to police people who are on welfare payments. And to make sure they're engaging with a system, it doesn't matter what the system is, but just engaging with some kind of representation of a government body to make sure that they're meeting whatever arbitrary checkmarks they have for their given situation.

That's their primary role, but they don't like to acknowledge that part. And they believe that they're there to help you get back to work, or get a job in the first place. But in my experience, that's usually some of the last things that they actually want to do based on the ways that the income works.

**Iris**

What's it been like in terms of the COVID 19 pandemic, obviously, there was a time when you didn't have to talk to them. But that was like a brief, six months time, my experience was like the providers wanted you to be back in person and they wouldn't wear masks in a small office, but mixed bag as well. Some providers are accommodating, but it's like you have to do all this effort moving around.

**Hannah**

So I was with Disability Employment Provider called Expression Employment before the start of the pandemic, and during the start of it. But after a mutual obligations period of not having to interact with the system, the provider, shut down the service because it was facilitating LGBT, disabled people in that sector. And they lost the contract that they had for that service.

So I was referred to RainbowWISE employment. And initially, after the little break, they sent some demanding text messages to me, demanding that I, without even having met me or talked to me, that I come into their office for interviews in the intake process, in spite of them not knowing anything about who I am, or the state of my health, or whether that will be possible, which was very rude, made me pretty upset, and pretty stressed out for a while and managed to be clearer that there was no circumstance in which I would be willing to do that.

And that I would be happy to allow them to work out some accommodations that were necessary if they wanted me to engage in their programs. And so I primarily have phone calls or video appointments. Yeah.

**Iris**

I had a similar trajectory in that I was with Expression and they shut down. And I was referred to Wise but they didn't get me onto the LGBTI Wise stream. So I got referred to these other Wise people and then they were pushing all this stuff, they didn't really understand my health conditions and then one day they like, asked me about "are you transgender", or something, as if it had something to do with me being sick.

It was really, it was just a complete mess. And eventually, they were like, "oh, we should refer to the LGBT ones". But I think like my overall understanding of the system, it's like a system critique. It doesn't matter. Like how nice they are, they have to perform a role they have to keep their job. Yeah.

Yeah, I think it like forecloses the possibilities. It's like once I'm on waitlists for some mental health service that's an ongoing I finally get around to it, don't get on with the person, need to request another one and I'm on the waitlist for another year. And yet, the state puts money into these people that talk to you every few weeks. It's like pretty clear, like what the state cares about is punitive stuff.

**Hannah**

100% like, you could have an absolute sweetheart for someone who's the supporting person for you. But at the end of the day, they're still like, a cog in an oppressive machine. There's useful things that they can do for you. If you know the right questions to ask. But they're incentivised to kind of provide you with the very least, which is not a support network. It's like you're the product here. You're not someone receiving support. Okay.

That's reflected by the nature of who some of these organisations are. I haven't seen MAX Employment as a disability and service provider, but I have seen them as a job service provider and their parent company is Maximus Solutions, which they run in Australia various neoliberal projects from prisoner transport to patient care in the United States, they are responsible for prisons and the same in the UK amongst a multitude of outsourced government programs.

And interestingly, MAX Employment is like the place where I experienced the most transphobia, the most antisemitic, just built in vileness. It's unsurprising to find out that organisations like this are responsible for the alienation and anxiety of people from all walks of life, let alone as an organisation being directly linked to deaths in custody. The people that go for these jobs and work in these industries have a lot of blood on their hands. And they don't take too kindly to it when you try and point that out.

**Iris**

The theme of this year's Disability Day broadcast is Rest is Survival. And I'm wondering if you have thoughts on how the penalty of logic of the DES program and logic around back to normal and COVID-19 pandemic prevents rest as survival.

**Hannah**

First and foremost, on an individual level, myself and a lot of other people who are experiencing chronic health situations, breakdown of medical support systems. And just other complications due to the nature of disability may or may not already be in a position like me, where we're visiting a specialist or a GP, multiple times a week.

And sometimes those appointments require multiple hours on public transport to get to areas where you can afford to see someone, sometimes taking entire days from us in the search for recovery. And that takes rest. And then you throw in the mutual obligation requirement for people to have to do the same thing to travel to an office to jump through hoops to keep continue to receive social payments.

**Hannah**

This increases the exhaustion and exacerbates our conditions and increases stress and is the opposite of helping shield marginalised and vulnerable peoples whole generally considered approach to surviving this pandemic. But the capitalist and institutional push to bring "COVID normal", further pushes people like me out of public life, even at the margins, and in the fringes where you think people might be looking after each other a little bit better, that's still felt just as much.

And then you throw in also the people who don't have disabilities, catching a virus that has the potential to cause them a lifelong series of health complications, and then also cutting the amount of time that they have to recover, to force them back into institutions because they need to keep their job or they need to keep money in the government's not willing to support people, just increasing the spread.

By not providing forms of support that are necessary in order for people to be able to isolate and still look after their communities. It's not really in line with that at all. It's about trying to get back to as much exploitation as possible, while cutting as much out of the social spending budget as they possibly can. Because at the end of the day, it's about a budget sheet, not people's lives.

**Iris**

Yeah, 100%. That's been like decades of cuts to Social Security. And that's not to like romanticise things. In the 70s when they were a little less punitive and weren't as small poverty payments. But there is this progress narrative, and I'm particularly thinking about, like respectability politics in trans circles that disassociates from illness, disability, or madness, and how that throws trans people who are disabled and trans under the bus.

And I'm also thinking about the disability rights movement, and a lot of mainstream rhetoric around choice and work that the state can easily co-op to cut welfare, to create like these profitable DES provider markets and extract more and more labor for disabled people.

**Hannah**

This progress narrative is in so many different spaces. With the disability sector of the employment service providers, the people who work for them will do the very bare minimum, while newspapers print that $1.3 billion has been spent on people who are wasted space.

So we have in the media narratives that say that our lives are meaningless, a burden to everyone around us. And then we're asked to navigate these institutions that frame themselves as helping provide us with care. But what they're really providing us is more stress, tangible and implicit threat of violence if we aren't able to cooperate in the ways they decide that we are capable of.

These are people that don't have medical backgrounds and don't understand the conditions that a lot of us are living in, and the general public, misguided at every turn about what the true nature of these institutions is like, and you're always going to have tokenistic advocacy groups that are used by the state to dismantle grassroots movements, whether that's in LGBT activist, and politics, and then having institutions that the state can provide funding to that make it seem like they're doing something for us, when in reality, these institutions and organisations don't represent the vast majority of people in our communities.

So the myth of eternal progress is just this white supremacist idea that we live at the end of history. And things are better now than they've ever been because they have to be right? It's part of the capitalist fantasy about Western imperialism, and cultures of subjugation that you don't have anything to complain about, things are better than they've ever been. It's a silencing tactic.

**Iris**

Yeah, for sure. Do you have any further thoughts on like, where to from here? And like resistance and solidarity against these systems? The big question, yeah,

**Hannah**

Please wear a mask when you're in a public space. Me and every other immunocompromised person that I know who is, happens to take a big step back from any kind of social or public life, are sick of begging you to take the mildest of precautions that help prevent more harm happening to people in our communities. Not only for ourselves, but also for you. I can't overstate that enough.

Apart from that, the disability employment service providers can provide you with more than you know, talk to each other, find out what you've gotten from them. They can buy you more than just some work clothes, they can pay for things that they will try and pretend that they can't pay for. Use that for what it is if you're capable of doing so. But really, these institutions are never going to be our saviour.

And the only way to provide the meaningful support that each of us need in our lives is stronger grassroots movements and people who are willing to do work to help look after each other. So whether that's through mutual aid groups like the food angels who help provide food to a sliver of our community, if there was more people doing things like that. People willing to help people get to and from appointments so they don't have to risk their health through public transport, which is not exactly the safest place to be during a pandemic. And also to righteously be accessible at the best of times, to just helping look after each other and understand our needs, in a mutually beneficial way. We can all help each other if we prepared to.

**Iris**

You just heard from Jael/Hannah, ending there onthe solidarity we need to build a new world from the ashes of disabling employment services. You're listening to Rest Is Survival on 3CR community radio 855 am streaming live at 3CR.org.au digital and on your community radio app. A special thanks to Pauline Vetuna and 3CR for putting together today.

There's lots I haven't touched on properly in this program. The white supremacist state restricts migrants from any social safety net for many years. The social security system particularly punishes First Nations peoples in their settler colony. I invite our settlers on these stolen lands to ask how we can act in solidarity against the border and the colony. In particular pushing in solidarity with the struggle for land rights such as supporting landback initiatives, such as Wuurn Of Kanak, in your search engine. To go out I'm dreaming a revolutionary future where Centrelink hold music is a distant memory that we dance to pumped up in an accessible party of our dream and we get all the rest we need. Thank you for calling.

**Voiceover**

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